

A SAGA OF COMPASSION AND CONFLICT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE JOINT FAMILY SYSTEM IN MANJU KAPUR'S *HOME*

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Abstract:

*Manju Kapur's works belong to the Postmodern Indian English fiction. Indian English women novelists have begun to talk boldly about extramarital affairs, lesbian relationships, etc. It is in this situation that Manju Kapur goes back to history. Even though her other novels, *A Married Woman* and *The Immigrant* are essentially postmodern in character, *Home* talks about an out-dated theme - the joint family system. Kapur's handling of the theme suggests that though the joint family system has vanished from postmodern novels, its relevance has not fully diminished in the Indian society. This paper attempts an analysis of the joint family system reflected in the third novel of Manju Kapur, *Home* and how it acts as a means of suppression of women. It also seeks to analyse how women adjust themselves to all the circumstances in order to have a safe and secure family life. The central objective of the paper is to analyse how far Manju Kapur has succeeded in portraying the joint family system in the postmodern era and how women are shaped according to the patriarchal system prevailing in India.*

Keywords: *Indian society, joint family system, patriarchy, suppression, marriage, adjustments.*

Literature is the medium through which the quintessence of our living is made supreme by linking it to imaginative experience. "Literature reflects accepted patterns of thought, feeling and action, including patterns of expressions and society's unconscious assumptions" (Rose 186). In fact, for almost all the historical details of the ancient past, our most reliable sources have been the great works of literature. The modern writer also does not write in isolation, he/she is involved in social reality. Indian novelists have risen to the occasion and adequately reflected the various aspects of society. Manju Kapur is of particular interest in this area because her novels reflect Indian society in general, a macrocosm in a microcosm.

Home is one of the best works of Manju Kapur which gives a clear picture of what life in a joint family is. With answering affection Manju Kapur follows the members of the traditional family of three generations into the uneasy world, they come to inhabit. The patriarch, Banwari Lal, a textile shop owner in the middle class New Delhi neighbourhood was a believer in the old ways. Men worked out of the home, women within, men carried forward the family line, and women enabled their mission.

Banwari Lal had three children - Yashpal, Pyare Lal and Sunita. According to Karve, "a joint family is a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common and who participate in common worship and are related to each other as some particular type of kindred" (Kumar 158). Banwari Lal made use of the family property for the welfare of the family members. Yashpal and Pyare Lal helped their father in the shop. "The two sons had been brought up to consider their interests synonymous with those of the family ... This was not a democracy, in which freewheeling individualism could be allowed to wreck what was being so carefully built. United we stand, divided energy, time and money are squandered" (*Home* 6).

The seemingly tranquil world of the patriarchal joint family is fraught with tension when Yashpal fell in love with Sona. The joint families are against love marriages. Also Sona was not financially sound.

Yashpal remained firm in his decision; finally the family yielded. In all Hindu marriages horoscope is the most important thing. Here also an astrologer, 'Babaji' is consulted. Yashpal's love for Sona was over whelming. "The mother's eagle eye noted [the] variations in her son's behaviour" (10). In a joint family one's mother is prior to one's wife. Naturally when one gets married his love shifts from his mother to his wife and the mother starts ill-treating her daughter-in-law. But Yashpal consoled Sona, "once we have children, you will see how she changes." (11).

Even after long years of marriage, Sona remained childless. Sona had a sister named Rupa, who was also childless. "Sona hid this fact as long as she could from her in-laws" (15).

To a traditional woman matrimony is incomplete without motherhood. Motherhood is regarded as the 'biological destiny' and the greatest ambition of a woman. A child is considered to be a woman's happiness and her justification, through which she is supposed to find self-fulfillment and self-realisation. Even a delayed motherhood is a cause of anxiety. In Indian society, it is only the woman who is subjected to humiliation because of this. (Suneel 10)

Yashpal's brother Pyare Lal's marriage with Sushila made the life of Sona more miserable. "Silently Sona watched as Pyare Lal's father-in-law gifted a scooter to his future son-in-law and furnished the four rooms of the second storey with a fully stoked kitchen, fridge, ... [etc.,] She realised ... how poor in gifts her own marriage had been" (*Home* 12). This shows how important dowry is. Dowry is "the property which a man receives from his wife or her family at the time of his marriage" (Ahuja 51). Dowry system has become a part and parcel of Indian society. A girl who does not bring enough dowry to the family's expectation is ill-treated in her in-law's house. Within a year after marriage Sushila gave birth to two boys and this increased Sona's sufferings. Jealousy ran up and down Sona's veins and she "wished she did not have to live in a joint family! If she and her husband lived separately, she too could be happy ..." (*Home* 15).

Sunita, Banwari Lal's daughter was ill-treated by her husband Murli. According to him her dowry had been small and he demanded more. The joint families share the general belief that once a daughter is married off she is no longer their responsibility. Fourteen years after her marriage, Sunita died of burns in an accident, which can be regarded as an instance of dowry death. At home the mother cried non-stop and Sona tried to console her. "The old woman glared at Sona and spat out... What can you know of a mother's feelings? All you do is enjoy life, no children, no sorrow" (18). Sunita's death made her son, Vicky, Sona's responsibility. She took care of the boy in order to please Yashpal and his family. After ten years of marriage, Sona was blessed with a child, Nisha. Joint families share the belief that a woman's prime function is to serve as the vessel that will bring forth the next generation. When she finally did conceive, her mother-in-law - known only as 'Maji', never by name, an indication of her status as nothing more significant than the patriarch's wife - promptly started doting on her. Preference to a boy child is evident in such remarks as "And now the womb has opened, a baby brother will come". The traditional Indian belief that "births and deaths bring their own pollution" (36), is given room in this novel. For ten days after the birth of Nisha no god figure was touched, no meals cooked. Food was provided by the relatives. After a week when Nisha's horoscope was examined it was found that she was a 'mangli'. It was said that 'manglis' were horribly difficult to marry off. "Sona silently hoped the family would not blame her too much for a mangli girl" (39).

Nisha's birth meant certain neglect to Vicky. Meanwhile Sona was blessed with a second pregnancy. Vicky, by now seventeen, confused and uncared for, was destined to become the family's black sheep, and he took his first steps in this direction by sexually abusing his little cousin Nisha. Kapur's handling of this incident is stunningly matter-of-fact. One minute Vicky and Nisha, brother and sister, were playing together and bantering on the terrace; the next minute he was touching her private parts and then using her little fist to aid in jerking himself off. But what is even scarier than the actual incident is its

aftermath. Some of the elders figured out what might have happened, but bringing it into the open was so unthinkable that the possibility was not even discussed; instead they decided to let the traumatised Nisha live with her aunt. Family honour must be preserved at all costs. Situations like this will no doubt sound improbable to those who have no insider's knowledge of what can happen behind the veil of the joint family system.

As Nisha grew, Rupa bestowed careful love on her. From time to time Nisha's mother insisted her daughter come home to be groomed in the traditions of the Banwari Lal household. Sona wanted Nisha to keep fasts as she was a 'mangli'. When Nisha refused to keep fast Sona asked, "How are you going to get married, madam, if you do not make sacrifices?" (92). The traditional superstitious beliefs and customs prevalent in the Indian society are well portrayed here. Every female member of the Banwari Lal family observed 'karva chauth', they fasted the whole day. All the married women observed this ritual for the welfare of their husbands and Nisha was forced to do so for her would-be husband. The joint family does not allow anyone to develop in independent lines. When Vicky expressed his desire to start a part-time business, his wish was denied. Any attempt at modernity was not welcomed by the patriarch. When the patriarch passed away, Maji had become a widow. "They smashed the glass bangles on her wrists... They pulled off her toe rings, they unclasped her mangla sutra, they removed all the coloured saris from her wardrobe and left the white" (125). This is the kind of treatment meted out to a Hindu widow.

When Nisha returned home her mother discovered to her horror that, at sixteen Nisha's cooking skills were a big zero. Nisha discovered in turn to her horror that her mother's idea of a daughter was one who helped her every time in the kitchen. Sona blamed Rupa, "that Masi of yours has ruined your head. What does a girl need with studying? Cooking will be useful her entire life... This is the life of a woman: to look after her home, her husband, her children, and give them food she has cooked with her own hands" (125-26). In the traditional Indian society a girl's cooking skills are also taken into account for marriage. Along with attention to her culinary skills, Sona took special care to include Nisha in all her 'pujas'.

As Nisha was a 'mangli' and as such it would take time to get her married off, the family thought of educating her further. Sona did not like this. According to her "people are suspicious of brides that are very educated" (139). Finally after many discussions it was decided to send Nisha to a women's college which "would do nicely for a girl waiting to get married" (140). Eventually she fell in love with a boy named Suresh. With the addition of new members the traditional family house became unable to contain everyone. It was suggested that the house should be pulled down and a modern one built in its stead. Yashpal could not tolerate this - "pull down their whole house, just because of a few adjustment problems" (168). Finally Yashpal yielded and kept quiet for "in a joint family, compromise is of the essence" (169).

Nisha continued to meet Suresh and they got intimate too. Nisha wanted Suresh to meet her father. Tensed about the outcome of the meeting Nisha talked with Rupa. "Masi, what do you think of love marriages? ... They are a very bad thing. Too much adjustment. Look at your mother. She spent ten years in sacrifice before her situation improved" (195). On enquiry it was found that Suresh was financially and caste wise lower than the Banwari Lals. Even though Yashpal and Sona married for love, they were completely against their daughter marrying the boy she loved. Financial background and caste are taken into account while arranging a marriage. Eventually Suresh abandoned Nisha and left the town. Nisha felt depressed after this incident. What had been buried all these years in the recesses of her mind now came back to haunt her. Gradually she developed skin problems. Doctors told that the skin problem was purely psychological and it would be cured after her marriage. An advertisement inviting proposals for Nisha was placed in the 'mangli' section of a newspaper. How important financial background, caste and horoscope of the bridegroom are in an arranged marriage is clear in the following passage. "Wanted own business, graduate, manglik boy... from kaisyasth community, own property for only mangli daughter, UP kaisyasth ... Horoscope a must. Send details..." (225).

Nisha wanted to study further after she finished her B.A. This was too much for a traditional joint family which was not in favour of women's education and job. "Your in-laws will not like the idea of your working... I certainly won't let my wife work. Who is going to look after the house?" (243) was the reaction of Nisha's younger brother Raju. When a proposal came for Raju from a very rich family, Yashpal could not reject it, but he was a bit hesitant because in a joint family younger brothers should not marry before elder sisters. In joint families one cannot take individual decisions. Everything is decided by the elders. A boy is allowed to see the girl only after everything, including dowry is settled among the elders. "Raju was allowed a glimpse of the girl, though his opinion was the least important" (250). Raju's wife was not a domesticated girl. She hardly came out of her room and never helped Sona in the house work. Raju began to neglect his duties as a son and as a brother. This created strife in the family because in a joint family man is closer to his mother than to his wife.

Nisha, now working as a primary school teacher got tired of the job and pleaded with Yashpal to give permission to start a business. Sona was not pleased at this new development in Nisha's life. "Families wanted a daughter-in-law, wife, and mother; husbands were not looking for business women" (296). After a lot of controversies, Nisha started her business which became very famous. Meanwhile the marriage mill went on. At last a proposal came for Nisha from a widower - Arvind. Nisha had only one concern - "She would only consent to a match with a family who let her work" (296). The marriage took place and Nisha was taken to Arvind's house. Arvind was very much attached to his mother as is appropriate in the Indian patriarchal society. Nisha could not continue her business as both her husband and her mother-in-law did not favour it. The novel ends with Nisha giving birth to twins - a boy and a girl. Now she had completely forgotten what had happened to her in the past and she even forgot her skin problems. She became a complete woman with motherly feelings sprouting out.

Home is a realistic and compassionate account of an extended family based in a teeming suburb of New Delhi. It reflects the Indian social set up and values. Spanning three generations, the novel engages with the lives and dreams of the various family members, intertwining their compelling stories with that of the cloth-selling business of their own. In this novel we can see Yashpal, Pyare Lal and their families staying in the same house along with their parents. This kind of largeness of size is one of the basic characteristics of a joint family. In the joint family set up the work load is shared among the members, often unequally. The women are often house wives and cook for the entire family. The patriarch of the family lays down the rules and arbitrates disputes. The house often has a large reception area and a common kitchen. Each family has its own bedroom. Here in *Home* also each family has its own bedroom. But they all dine together consuming the food cooked in the same kitchen. In a joint family any disgrace to any member is not considered as a personal disgrace but it is a disgrace to the whole family. Therefore family members are not allowed to do anything disgraceful to the family. In a joint family individual freedom is not given importance. Anything done should be for the collective good of the family. Elder's support and protection are two other characteristics of the joint families. Whatever conflicts, petty jealousies and strifes are there, the 'we' feeling always exists among the members of the joint family. In a joint family the adjustments that a woman has to do are really high. Nisha failed in her love. Although she succeeded in her business, she had to give it up for her husband's family. It was not just Nisha who suffered all through her life, Sona, Sushila, Maji, all suffered in different ways.

The traditional Hindu joint family portrayed in this novel has not disintegrated completely but attempts at modernisation and industrialisation have shattered some of its values. Prof. Kapadia has rightly said, "Hindu sentiments are even today in favour of the joint family. Disruption of the joint family by legislation is therefore, rightly considered to be non-Hindu, because it ignores Hindu family history and sentiments" (Singh 158). Manju Kapur's works belong to the Postmodern Indian English fiction. The broadening of the thematic range is a peculiarity of Postmodern Indian English fiction. Indian English women novelists have begun to talk boldly about extramarital affairs, lesbian relationships, etc. It is in this

situation that Manju Kapur goes back to history. *Home* talks about an out-dated theme - the joint family system and how it acts as a means of suppression of women. Kapur's handling of the theme suggests that though the joint family system has vanished from postmodern novels, its relevance has not fully diminished in the Indian society. Another important fact is that even though women in the postmodern novels are independent there is no considerable change in their condition.

It could be argued that Manju Kapur's novels portray India of the forties and fifties, a conservative period, when women could not assert their individuality. But at the same time we cannot argue that the novels do not have any of the characteristics of a postmodern novel. The two factors which enable the modern woman to assert herself are education and economic independence. Therefore, Nisha can be considered as modern woman, being educated and having a job before marriage. At the same time Kapur never permits Nisha any assertion of power or freedom. Therefore, it can be said that Manju Kapur, the noteworthy story teller, presents the postmodern novels in a traditional narrative thread. She comes to represent the uneasy co-existence of tradition and modernity in her novels. Kapur's fellow novelist Kiran Nargarkar declared: "Manju Kapur is one of the most perceptive chroniclers of that microcosm of the nation: the joint family. The narrative voice is deceptively soft, for Kapur lays it all bare - conflicting loyalties, intrigues, triumphs, and tragedies" (Das, B. K. 93).

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